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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3050  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2435  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE  
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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000954

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KPAO KG

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES FREEDOM OF SPEECH WITH KYRGYZ STATE TV DIRECTOR

REF: 07 BISHKEK 1400

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR TATIANA C. GFOELLER FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador met September 15 with Kyrgyz State Television and Radio Company (KTR) Director Eshimkanov to discuss the state of the media and the prospects for the development of public television. Eshimkanov claimed credit for recent reforms and restructuring at KTR, but expressed his doubts that Kyrgyzstan was ready for a public television station. He also signaled his displeasure with restrictions on programming imposed from above. Eshimkanov expressed support for the presence of Manas Air Base, which he believes will protect Kyrgyzstan from the threat of Islamic extremism.  
End Summary

¶2. (C) During her September 15 introductory meeting with KTR Director, Melis Eshimkanov, the Ambassador stressed her support for freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Kyrgyzstan. She noted that Kyrgyzstan is often praised for being a leader in freedom of speech in the region. The Ambassador also expressed her support for the development of public television in Kyrgyzstan and her interest in working with KTR to achieve that end.

Reform or Control at KTR?

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¶3. (C) Eshimkanov, who has been KTR Director for almost a year (Reftel), touted himself as a "liberal" and a "democrat," and someone who is trying to change the system from within. He said that he had agreed to become Director of KTR out of love for his country and a desire to change KTR for the better. He said he had written the original law to establish public television, but now he believes Kyrgyzstan is not ready for public television. When the Ambassador asked if that would change, he said, "Everything changes with time." Eshimkanov was very positive about a recent presidential decree that reduced the number of people employed by KTR and closed KTR's orchestra, chorus, and theater. He said the decree was his initiative, because the legacy of the Soviet system is a larger-than-necessary workforce: 2,200 employees on the payroll. He would like to

cut that number to 500-600.

¶4. (C) Eshimkanov brought up the issue of censorship at KTR. In April, when KTR had refused to air an episode of the RFE/RL-produced talk show, "Inconvenient Questions," Eshimkanov said he had been so angry over this "step backward" that he wanted to resign, but Medet Sadyrkulov, President Bakiyev's Chief of Staff, convinced him to stay. Eshimkanov said that he faces "more restrictions, more conditions" from above. He said that 15-20% of KTR air time is reserved for state programming, but he is focusing his efforts on improving the remaining 80-85% of content.

¶5. (SBU) Eshimkanov proposed a deal with the U.S. Embassy whereby the Embassy would provide technical support, training, and grants in exchange for a weekly or monthly program dedicated to Embassy programming. He said he has offered similar opportunities to other embassies.

Support for the U.S. and the Base?

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¶6. (C) Eshimkanov claimed that he is so pro-American that he is sometimes accused of being a "CIA agent." He boasted of having met all previous U.S. Ambassadors to Kyrgyzstan and President Bush. He also claimed to be very close to President Bakiyev, and he said he advised Bakiyev not to support "Putin's mistaken policy in Georgia." Eshimkanov said Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia set a bad precedent for Russia's SCO allies, given China's concerns over separatism in Xinjiang and Tibet and Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek enclaves in the south.

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¶7. (C) Eshimkanov said he also told Bakiyev to continue supporting Manas Air Base and the "balance of power" in the region. Eshimkanov predicted that beginning October 2008, there will be immense pressure from Russia on the Kyrgyz government to close Manas Air Base. He said it will be increasingly important for the U.S. to explain the purpose of the Base and dispel myths about invading Iran, damage to the environment, and other persistent misinformation.

¶8. (C) Eshimkanov said that if he were President Bakiyev, he would do everything possible to keep the Base because it offers protection against Islamic fundamentalists. In his view, Islamic fundamentalism is more dangerous than the political opposition. The Islamists have money and influence, he said. Whenever KTR tries to pull an Islamic program off the air, Islamists line up at his door to protest. He called the Fergana Valley a powder keg of Islamic extremism where young men sit around villages "armed to the teeth just waiting for a signal to do something nasty."

Comment

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¶9. (C) Eshimkanov "talks the talk" of the importance of freedom of speech, and he has been candid about both censorship and the need to reform KTR. But Eshimkanov has also been a political chameleon. Once the head of a pro-opposition newspaper, Eshimkanov left the ranks of the opposition to accept the KTR position. While Eshimkanov may be trying to enact some reforms from within, as long as the KTR board of directors is appointed by the president, it is unlikely there will be significant reforms at KTR.

GFOELLER